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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this follow-up study was to determine 14 high school graduates' perceptions of the open-informal learning environment they had experienced in elementary school. Subjects were interviewed individually on their recollections (facts and feelings) of their fifth grade year, and were shown videotaped scenes of themselves in the open-informal classroom. The subjects were then videotaped while engaged in a panel discussion of their fifth grade experiences. Both videotapes (the 1973 tape of the subjects as fifth graders and the 1980 tape of the subjects as high school seniors) were viewed by a panel of experienced elementary school teachers. The panel selected and categorized the students' attitudes toward choice of classroom activities, the school, teacher-student relationships, student goals, and teacher role. In general, subjects expressed positive attitudes toward the open-informal classroom and indicated that this kind of learning environment allows students to choose their own activities; work at their own pace; set their own academic goals; and develop closer and warmer relationships with their teachers. Results also indicated that the elementary school teacher's role should include identification of and follow-up on students' academic needs and deficiencies. (Author/MP)

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A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR OPEN-INFORMAL CLASSROOM: SEVEN YEARS LATER

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INTRODUCTION

Open-Informal learning environments have been researched to the point where there now exists a fairly sizable body of work on the academic and psychological effects of open classroom teaching.

A review of the reseach procedures indicates an emphasis on standardized tests of academic achievement, plus observational and experimental methodologies. Teacher interviews have also been an important part of the assessment strategy as have interviews with children and parents. Interview studies, however, are still quite rare in open education evaluation and there is a need for more of them, for they may well make up in richness and depth what they lack in statistical precision (Horowitz 1979). Especially rare are any follow-up studies of students' perceptions of their open education experiences.

Of the studies reviewed concerning students' attitude toward school, evidence indicates that, compared with children in traditional classrooms, open classroom children feel at least equally positive, and often more positive, towards their school experience (Horowitz 1979).

In the areas of independence and creativity the research findings tend generally to support the hypotheses that open classrooms do promote greater

independence and creativity.

In a review of the research on the impact of the educational environment on student behavior, attitudes, and achievement, Weinstein (1979) found that the more "humane" educational settings were associated with better attendance, greater participation, and more positive attitudes toward the class, the instructor, and classmates. Kosmoski and Vockell (1978) also found that with individualization and learning centers, the classroom atmosphere was conducive to improved student attitudes and more effective learning.

A study of teaching practices and beliefs by Zahorik.(1980) found that teachers in open elementary schools believed more strongly than teachers in other types of schools that students are self-directed, are competent decision makers, and learn through choice and exploration. The study also found that open teachers rejected the roles for teachers as a needs-diagnoser, a problem solving guide and an information giver.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions held by high school graduates toward the open-informal learning environment which they had experienced in the fifth grade. It was expected that the students' perception of their earlier open-informal experiences would be an indicator of the value of those experiences. It was also expected that this follow up study would provide information concerning the question of what do graduates think of the open-informal classroom they experienced in earlier years.

SETTING

The subjects were those high school graduating seniors who, seven years earlier as fifth grade students, had experienced the open-informal learning environment for the 1972-73 academic year. The group was limited to those fourteen individuals, five girls and nine boys, who were graduating from the local high school. The original fifth grade class had included twenty-six students, seven girls and nineteen boys, from a middle class suburban community. The original classroom was self-contained with no more space or funds than any of the other more "formal" classrooms in the building. The open-informal learning environment was one of pedagogical openness which included the following characteristics as described by Stephens (1974).

1. A minimum of lessons for the whole class; most instruction geared to small groups or individuals.
2. A variety of activities progressing simultaneously.
3. Flexible scheduling.
4. An environment rich in materials.
5. Freedom for children to move about, converse, work together, and seek help from one another.
6. Opportunities for children to make decisions about their work and to develop responsibility for setting and meeting their educational goals.
7. Provision for children to investigate matters of concern to them.
8. Flexible learning groups formed around interests.
9. Emphasis on experimentation and involvement with materials.
10. An atmosphere of trust, acceptance of children, and respect for their diversity.

11. A minimum of grading and marking.

12. Honest and open relationships between teacher and pupil and between pupil and pupil.

PROCEDURE

In 1973, the fifth grade open-informal classroom was videotaped showing the class of twenty-six boys and girls involved in several activities. The videotape was viewed by a panel of experienced teachers to determine the agreement on the openness and informality of the classroom learning environment.

There are many definitions of open education. Usually, however, there is agreement on a number of features. Students are involved in setting objectives. Diverse activities and materials are available. Space is used flexibly. Students are involved in decision-making. Scheduling depends on students' needs. Groups are based on students' interests. Self-evaluation of students is used, and students participate in rule-making (Macdonald 1970).

The learning environment was judged by the panel as open-education as Barth (1972), Katz (1972), Stephens (1974), and others have defined the term.

Seven years later, when the 1973 fifth graders were graduating from high school, they were studied as follows:

1. Each high school graduate was interviewed relative to individual recollections (facts and feelings) of that year in the fifth grade open-informal classroom.

2. The graduates then viewed the videotaped scenes of themselves as fifth graders when they were involved in the informal classroom.

3. The graduates were then videotaped as they were engaged in a panel discussion of their fifth grade experiences. Emphasis in the discussion was focused on how they now viewed their open-informal learning environment experiences and the value, as they perceived it, of that experience.

Both videotapes (the 1973 tape of the subjects as fifth graders and the 1980 tape of the subjects as high school graduates) were viewed by a panel of experienced elementary school teachers to select the subjects' stated perceptions concerning the subjects' attitudes toward their open-informal learning experiences.

FINDINGS

The subjects' comments, which were determined by the panel to be representative of the perceptions on which there was agreement, were categorized as follows:

Student Choice of Activity

1. "I liked school back then because you did what you wanted to."
2. "I thought it was set up pretty good - you worked at your own rate and you were able to do what you want to do."
3. "It was a good experience because you got to do more science - which I really enjoyed - more than English."
4. "I liked it because you got to work on things you liked to do - so you wanted to learn more. You got to work at your own pace. You didn't have to work on just what they told you."
5. "It was good back then when we worked with animals and things and not just books."
6. "Back then when you worked as a group and at your own pace, you were more interested in school. Now in high school, you can't work at your own pace, they have a time limit on everything."

Attitude Toward School

1. "I had a lot of fun experiences. That was a real fun class for me. It was a warm environment and you felt like learning. Now you're afraid of what other kids are going to think."
2. "In my opinion the informal classroom system was pretty good. It seemed to work for me. I'm not saying it will work for everyone."

3. "Back then it was 'lots of fun stuff'."

4. "School was more enjoyable back then because it was more group learning than individual learning. School is a lot more fun when you stress groups. Now we shuttle from one room and teacher to another teacher. In that fifth grade we worked in groups of two or three - usually your friends - and you did everything throughout the day with them. It was really a lot more enjoyable then - we were a tighter knit group then we are now. Here in high school we are just kinda lost in the mass."

5. "I felt a lot better in the informal classroom than I have felt in other classrooms."

Teacher Student Relationships

1. "Now, in classrooms with some teachers, you're afraid to answer a question because, if your answer is wrong - that's it!"

2. "Our teacher was a good teacher. She got through to her students - you could communicate openly with her."

3. "Our teacher was real nice and you wanted to learn."

4. "It is better if the teacher relates to the student on a one to one basis and at the grade level of the student rather than 'I'm the teacher and you're the student and I'll tell you what to do.' The relationship should be more on a friendship basis."

5. "It is important that teachers let their students know that they are human--that they do have families like the rest of us--that they are not mechanical machines that are put in the closets when the students leave the room. It is important because then you can relate to the teachers and you know where they are coming from."

6. "It is important for teachers to try to relate to their students - to get down to the student's level and to be a person - to be yourself and let it come through on the subject - makes it more interesting."

7. "Important to have informality where you can relate with the teacher. You don't have to have open concept in order to have informality. The teacher has to put some of himself in it."

Student Goals: Needs or Wants?

1. "On the videotape, our teacher made the comment that students would sign up for what they needed to know, or what they think they need to know. A fifth grader is not going to sign up for what he <u>needs</u> to know; he is going to sign up for what he <u>wants</u> to do - the enjoyable things for him."

2. "If I disliked fractions, I would avoid them at all costs and do the things I liked and I would be missing part of my education."

3. "I don't think I missed much, I've always enjoyed school. But I think that for someone who didn't enjoy school - it would be a perfect way to spend the day doing nothing but walking around doing many different things. This informal environment would be good for someone who is self-motivated and would enjoy learning."

4. "With the checklist, you had your goals, but most of your goals weren't met. You tried to meet them but you weren't pushed to meet them."

5. "I enjoyed my experiences back then, it was fun for me but I didn't do the things I should have done. I didn't sign up for things I needed - I signed up for classes I liked. I fell behind in a lot of things."

6. "In an informal classroom system it is really easy for someone to be busy at doing nothing. It is easy to look busy and not be busy."

7. "A kid in the fifth grade is not going to know what is best for him as far as his education is concerned. I liked math so I did math a lot - but I didn't like to read so I neglected the reading activities. I am not a very strong reader now and I think that not being pushed more has hurt me."

8. "The goals for the week and the checklist which we had in fifth grade were good. I think it is very important for kids to learn to make a checklist or goal list and strive to meet those goals."

Need for Teacher "Push"

1. It is good to let kids pick what they want to do but they should also be pushed a little bit to get what they need - the main points, like English."

2. "A teacher should learn how to push the students and still make it enjoyable for them. A teacher shouldn't be afraid to <u>push</u> a student."

3. "The teacher has got to push a student through. Some kids don't want to work. The teacher has really got to work with those kids."

4. "If students have any trouble, the teacher should help them work on that - like math, for example. The teacher should help students work extra hard on the areas where they are having trouble."

5. "The teacher didn't push us enough in our weak areas. What we were weak in - in grade school and weren't pushed in, we fell behind in high school and probably are still weak in."

6. "Some students need more pushing than others. The informal classroom would work best for the more advanced students who just want to surge on ahead of the class by themselves. But some of the slower students really need the pushing and the more general studies - like math and English - the basics."

7. "I think the classroom would be better if, for a couple of days a week, they let the kids do what they want to do in certain areas, but on certain other days, have the teacher say what the kids should do and push them in the areas where they are weaker."

8. "If they are going to have an open classroom they should have 2 or 3 teachers to work with students in areas where they are weak."

9. "I personally believe a classroom should have more structure than the one we had."

10. "I think our teacher had the right idea when she tried to make an open classroom but you did get a little worse in the subjects you were already bad at - you needed to be pushed a little more. But it worked good for me."

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions based on the perceptions of the students involved in this follow-up study are as follows:

1. School was perceived by students as more enjoyable and more interesting when:

   a. you work at your own rate.

   b. you are involved in making the decisions as to what you want to do.

   c. you can work in groups with your friends.

   d. you work with things as well as books.

   e. you can get extra help in the ares where you are having trouble.

   f. you feel safe and not afraid to ask or answer a question.

   g. you can communicate openly with the teacher.

h. you can relate to the teacher in a human, open manner.

i. you can relate one on one to the teacher.

2. School was perceived by students as being more productive and more worthwhile when:

a. you are "pushed" by the teacher.

b. you are helped in your weaker areas.

c. you are required to accomplish tasks identified for you by the teacher.

d. you learn to set your own goals and meet them.

e. you have the structure necessary for you.

f. you have times when the room is "open" and times when it is formal.

g. you have a warm environment.

h. you have a teacher who relates to you personally.

i. you have a classroom style that matches your learning style.

This study provides some of the first information from a follow-up study of students' perceptions of their earlier open-informal learning environments.

The results strongly indicate that students, seven years later and after graduating from high school, still respond positively to the open-informal learning environment as described in this study.

The results of this follow-up study also strongly indicate that the teacher's role with elementary school age children must include the identification of and follow-up on "academic needs" and deficiencies.

This study has also provided evidence that the degree of structure, openness, "push," control and warmth needed will vary with individual students.

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